

On Violations: The Arab Women's Case

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"[Aggression against women] have led feminists to locate male violence against women in the realm of the political. It expresses not purely individual anger and frustration but a collective, culturally sanctioned misogyny which is important in maintaining the collective power of men." Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Fraser

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 18, 1979. Although eleven Arab countries have ratified the Convention, they have also expressed reservations pertaining to women's rights in the family. This hesitation or unwillingness to adopt the convention wholeheartedly is attributed to the incompatibility of these articles with the Islamic sharia and their non-conformity with national laws and legislation. Even though discrimination against women violates the principles of equal rights for all human beings, there is still a great deal of controversy in the Arab world regarding the issue, and thus women's rights are far from secure. As Laure Mughazel asserts in an interview with *Al-Raida*: "Women's rights are inevitably part of human rights. There cannot be human rights without women's rights, nor can there be women's rights outside the framework of human rights. All of the issues raised by women's movements are essentially humanitarian issues(*Al-Raida*, 74/75).

The laws governing the domestic private sphere - marriage, divorce, children, adultery, rape, battery, incest and killing - restrict women's priorities and rights and empower the man at the expense of the woman. The suffocating personal status codes are products of societies where the individual has no value apart from the general community which includes family, sect, and tribe that determine the thoughts and actions of the individual. Accordingly, Arab legislation reveals many violations against women particularly in the domestic sphere. Among the violations of human rights are laws that regard domestic violence whether physical or psychological as generally private issues to be dealt with within the boundaries of the family. The general view is that the home and the family are deeply entrenched and invincible structures in which outsiders must not meddle.

Even if the law prosecutes for domestic violence, the victim is required to bring charges, but women rarely file complaints since Arab societies do not give support to an oppressed or abused women. Furthermore, there is little to indicate that Arab governments are concerned with domestic violence against women particularly that women hide their plights for various reasons which include social pressure, shame, disgrace, the fear of being subjected to more abuse and ill-treatment if the issue came out into the open, divorce, or loss of economic support. Furthermore, married women are less likely to take action against their aggressors, mostly husbands, because of unfair divorce, alimony and custody laws. At the same time, when this form of barbarity takes place, it is hard to monitor or discover particularly that the police cannot interfere between a husband and wife. The laws that deal with rape and other forms of violence against women are lax and compromising. For instance, the law does not acknowledge marital rape and dismisses any charges that do not involve physical coercion. The belief is that men are entitled to have unrestricted sexual access to women- sometimes especially-against women's will. This male violence functions as a threat to the woman's autonomy, undermines her self - esteem and limits her freedom of action. She lives with constant fear of sexual violence, and society makes it her responsibility to prevent it. If the worst occurs it is the woman who is blamed and her suffering is often underestimated, questioned or ignored. Woman is expected to monitor her behavior and accept the idea that male sexuality is natural and could be controlled by female prudence and discretion.

It is widely acknowledged that cases of violence against women are under reported in official records and the media. It receives little attention in the formal as well as informal sectors, and it is clear that there is an evident shortage in valid and reliable data needed to endorse and bring about action. Given the general resistance to doing anything about women's ordeals and problems in a rigidly masculine society, the fight for legislative reform must be accompanied by an effort to educate people and raise awareness campaigns to the political and legal status of women.

The file in this issue includes several articles dealing with women's personal as well as political rights. One article presents the findings from a recent research on Beirut women's perceptions of rape. Another interesting study highlights how Arab societies deal with crimes of honor. The file also contains a report on crimes of honor in Jordan, two testimonies of honor crimes committed in Lebanon, and an article on the Kuwaiti woman's struggle for political rights. Moreover, the file includes a study on the Moroccan Government's intentions to advocate a campaign to uphold women's rights. The study presents the opposing points of view, and how the liberals and the conservatives view the issue of women's rights. Last but not least, the file contains a summary of a study revealing attitudes of the Yemeni police to domestic violence.